

Cross/Bite

I was born into this world sideways.
Doctor said,
 surgery, to break my face
set it right again
 as if breaking were simple.
Wet places my lips have been:
 all the boys I've kissed—
so many caves I've licked
 saliva & sweat
holy water on my tongue.
 I grind my teeth at night
wake to white sand in my mouth:
 nocturnal silt, gritty loam.
My jaws pop when I talk
 but if I had the surgery, went cosmetic?
Oh, the typewriter in my bones—
 yes, I would miss that click/clack the most.

Cottonmouth

The man's mouth unhinged.

He said *I broke my jaw
and it open likes this now.*

I heard the wet click
of little bones unfastening.

~

I woke up before anyone else
and walked outside barefoot

to the chilled porch still slick
with a thin layer of morning dew.

There was a little coral snake
asleep, coiled by a rocking chair.

I wasn't afraid this time.

~

We were told the snake
was the most beautiful thing

God created until the snake
wanted to be God or like a god

or godlike. I'm not sure now.

~

It happened again—the same dream.

~

I have seen three women give birth
and with each contraction
the mighty hips break and stretch,
the leathery mouth of a snake.

I watched as they writhed
inside the all-consuming pain, pure as God,
fists clenched, wailing something
not quite human, but animal enough.

~

Once, she dreamt she swallowed
a snake till she *became* the snake—
looping, legless reptile, thick
and aching. She woke up paralyzed
until she shouted *Jesus*. Her arms
grasping the invisible beast, blacking
the dark.

~

The guy with the broken mouth
baptized me once inside a Pentecostal

church. He said I had to be fully
immersed for it to count for heaven,
you know.

He said Jesus's name only—
No trinity, just Jesus.

Then he touched me under the water.
Plucked and dripping, I came

to the surface, and I shouted and they shouted.
Everyone's mouths open in praise.

~

The snake hisses like a married man.
He measured and whispered slow

You better. Get out. Of my car.

In a way that meant *devour*:
to swallow *me* whole—

crystalline sweat stippled across his forehead,
his eyes, feral and glinting like two tiger eye
gemstones. The street glazed with vulgar light.
I felt so vulnerable when the tiny metals
unlatched

~

What if he wanted to leave
his wife and find another keeled
and granular body? His belly travels
like a snake. She believes her father
is also snake.

~

I have so many dark scars and purpled bruises
on my legs.

I have my mother's knees, crunchy and difficult.
Everything hurts when I'm about to go to sleep.

The snake is ready for me, *shhhhh*.

~

Every time she passes this one motel she shivers
at the things she did with her body to the man

with the mouth of a snake—all his holy,
masculine fire
consuming her—whole, she was taken.

